

SEN. BILL . 236

2-4-09

January 28, 2009

SENATE JUDICIARY  
EXHIBIT NO. 13  
DATE 2/4/09  
BILL NO. SB 236

Dear Senate Judiciary Committee Members:

I understand that all of you are very busy and I appreciate you taking a few minutes to read my letter. I have been asked to share my personal experiences with regard to the death penalty. I am a mental health therapist who began working at Montana State Prison in 1973 and worked there for 30 years retiring in 2003. During that time I was involved in working with staff and inmates when there was an execution. Initially it was surprising to me at the effect it had on staff. As you might imagine, it takes a lot of planning and work ahead of time to have an execution go off without a hitch. As a result staff starts to be effected days and weeks before the event and sometimes was still affected days and weeks afterwards. I have seen staff quit as an execution got close because they felt they couldn't work for an agency that killed people. Other staff called off sick or just weren't around on the day of the execution. Tension among staff was much higher as people picked sides, each trying to convince the other that their viewpoint was right. The people that got excited about the execution are even more concerning in my opinion. Because of the nature of the situation staff are asked to volunteer if they want to be involved and those that do so often are ex military, many who suffer from PTSD and other issues related to combat. Although they think they are doing fine, in many cases they are unconsciously playing out old issues through the execution which is not healthy for them. Staff involved with the execution often brag about what they are going to do and further add to the tension and discomfort of staff who feel differently. It has been my experience that it takes several days or weeks for everyone to settle down again.

Another part to the picture are the staff members who have gotten to know these offenders as people and now have to stand by as they are killed. When we say that a segment of our society is valueless and therefore can be killed we send a powerful message to our staff that the job they do has limited value to society because the people they are charged with working with don't really matter anyway. The irony for people working in the field is that they begin to see offenders as people, granted people who have done heinous things, but people none the less. It does not mean that they approve of the behavior but they realize that there are many factors that happen to a human being that result in the kind of rage that we see in men on death row.

The inmates fair better on the surface. It is in their nature to be self serving and mostly interested in themselves so on the surface they don't seem bothered by executions. However, it adds to their fear of the establishment and those in authority. Not only do we lock them up against their will (from their perspective) but we kill them. I have had many inmates through the

*years ask me how this makes us different from them. If they kill they go to prison, but if we kill, it's all right. They see it as a double standard.*

*When I first started working at the prison as a young woman in my 30's I didn't have an opinion one way or the other about the death penalty but as the years went by I moved to being in conflict about it, to realizing that in my opinion it just doesn't work and isn't helpful for society. Offenders as a group of folks are very damaged from all the things you hear about, abuse, neglect, etc. The more damaged the human being, the more likely he is to unleash rage on an innocent society. What I learned was that like it or not we all bear some responsibility for the dysfunction in our society and therefore have an obligation to manage these people in a humane way while holding them accountable for their actions. I have absolutely no problem with saying that someone is so damaged and so dangerous that he has lost his right to ever walk among us again and I am very willing to pay taxes to keep him in prison until he dies naturally.*

*I have many other concerns about the death penalty from moral and religious issues to concerns with the possibility of executing an innocent person. Although we are more sophisticated now, we are only human and mistakes can be made. It just seems to me that the most reasonable and responsible way to deal with offenders like this is to keep them in prison for life. Thank you for your time. I appreciate your reading this letter.*

*Respectfully,*

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